Demystifying the American Dream in Select Plays of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard

A Synopsis

Submitted for Registration to the Ph.D. (English) Programme in the University Department of English (Faculty of Humanities)

Under the Supervision of
Dr. Nidhi Singh
Assistant Professor
Department of English,
Gossner College,
Ranchi University, Ranchi.

Submitted by:
Anjali Priya

Ranchi University, Ranchi
2024

Overview

American literature was initially colonial literature, as the native Americans, who were the first inhabitants of the continent, did not contribute anything that could be stated as literature; they spread the words, poetry, and stories orally. This contributes to the fact that American literature began with that of the colonial period, with the authors who were Englishmen, or with those who thought and wrote as Englishmen. It can be rightly said that American literature is based on English literature (the literature of England), as the earliest of the writers brought mainly English ideas and their ways of writing. The early themes of the writing were concerned with the issues of living in a new land, living in the wilderness, and travelling. John Smith (1580–1631), an explorer and colonist, is regarded as the first American writer and also helped find Jamestown in 1607. His most significant work, *A True Relation of Virginia,* is considered the first American book written in English. In 1616, he named the newfound region as 'New England' and published an account of his expedition entitled *A Description of New England.* In this work, he has portrayed New England as the land of opportunities.

The United States of America has always been referred to as the 'land of dreams and opportunities.' Thousands of people migrate to the United States every year from different parts of the world to have access to these opportunities. The American Dream is an ideology that makes people inclined towards America, which provides an environment full of opportunities, prosperity, and wealth. The term 'American Dream' was coined by James Truslow Adams in his work *The Epic of America* (1931) and eventually became popular. Adams went on to trace the evolution of the American Dream and how the European nobility struggled to grasp its significance. The American Dream, according to Adams, is "Not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man

and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable of and be recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of their birth or position" (404).

Although the roots of the American Dream are in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The American Dream was alive even before there was any Declaration of Independence or even if no one called it such. This signifies that the American Dream is more likely to be a product of a cultural environment than a set of political arrangements. This dream signifies three components: that all men are equal, we all can trust one another and must help one another, and honest, sincere, and hard-working people must be rewarded.

The American Dream is a sort of ability to achieve, and anyone can attain it, but there are some principles one needs to follow throughout life, as one cannot achieve it just because he or she wants it. The American Dream seeks that-

- One must be willing to work hard.
- One needs to apply a lot of hard work.
- One must have faith.
- One needs to apply persistence.
- One must never give up.

The American Dream is an ideal that became the quest of many Americans. The idea of attaining the American Dream is to let society flourish in every field. The idea contains the elements of society, family, and financial success. As this dream is presented in twentieth-century American literature, it is unrealistic and unreachable until and unless one creates his

or her meaning of the American Dream.

This work attempts to present the original idea of the American Dream while also analysing its failures, as reflected in the works of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard.

State of Art

Edward Franklin Albee shortly after his birth on March 12, 1928, in Washington, DC, was placed for adoption. Edward was exposed to the stage at a young age by wealthy Reed Albee, who adopted him when he was an infant. Reed Albee's father was a well-known vaudeville producer. Albee was aware of his adoption status by the time he was six years old. Reed and Frances Albee, who took him in as a foster child, changed his name from Edward Harvey to Edward Franklin Albee III. From the time he was a little boy, Albee fought with his stepmother. He preferred to keep company with artists and intellectuals, while she aspired to elevate him to the ranks of high society. As a student, Albee detested school. He moved to New York to pursue a career as a writer after he dropped out of college when he was twenty years old. There he crossed paths with Thornton Wilder, who encouraged Albee to branch out from his background in poetry and prose and to commence writing for the stage. Living in Greenwich Village, Albee supported himself with a variety of low-paying jobs, including selling records and serving as a courier boy. His drama *The Zoo Story* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, written by Samuel Beckett, both had their Berlin premieres together in 1959. His work criticises the very foundations of American optimism that made him fall into the genre of the Theatre of Absurd. With The Theatre of Absurd as an inspiration, Albee created *The American Dream*, a play that borrowed both style and subject matter. The author despises the emotional aspect of family life and togetherness and rails against the values of optimism, development, and trust in the national purpose in this composition. Further, he took the four characters from *The American Dream* and reimagined their stories, placing them in different

settings and situations, in a play he called *The Sandbox.*

Sam Shepard, the American actor, writer, and director, was born in 1943 and lived until 2017. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979 and also received an Oscar Award nomination in 1983. His most impressive accomplishments as a director, writer, and actor have been in the realm of theatre. Sam was born in Illinois. His father Samuel Shepard Rogers was a US Air Force bomber pilot, farmer, and educator. His mother worked as a teacher as well. Shepard had the nickname Steve. He attended Mt. San Antonio College to study animal husbandry after finishing high school in 1961. He first encountered absurdism and abstract art in college. He had also been a member of the travelling theatre group named Bishop's Company. He didn't waste any time getting to New York to seek acting opportunities. During his time in New York, he changed his name from Steve Rogers to the stage name Sam Shepard. He and his family relocated to the US and settled in California in 1975. He continued his work in the theatre and, for the time being, took up a job in academia as the Regent's Professor of Drama at the University of California. He penned a screenplay based on a tour he had with Bob Dylan. His three most notable plays, *Curse of the Starving Class (1976), Buried Child (1979), and True West (1980)*, were all written during his stay at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in 1975.

Spiritual crisis, moral ambiguity, and social unrest are all vividly depicted in his plays. Sam Shepard sets forth the arguments against the veracity of the American Dream in his Family Trilogy. In his play *Buried Child*, he portrayed the frustration of falling short of the American Dream in all facets, including material success, prosperity, freedom, and the happiness of owning a house or raising a family.

Review of Literature

The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard, edited by Matthew Roudané, adds to the

chronological understanding of the life and career of Sam Shepard. It offers profound insight into the plight of the characters in a world filled with shattered families.

Jim Cullen's *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* is considered to be a seminal contribution to the concepts and ideologies of the American Dream. It helps us understand the original idea of the American Dream.

Beginning with the arrival of the English and continuing through the rise of the American Dream, James Truslow Adams traces the whole course of American history in his book *The Epic of America.*

James A. Crank's *Understanding Sam Shepard* helps us understand the works written by Sam Shepard. It has been a brilliant guide to Sam Shepard.

A number of assessments, compiled by Harold Bloom in *Bloom's Literary Themes, The American Dream,* provide diverse perspectives on the concept of the American Dream.

An article by Yufei Wang titled *Exploring the Realisation of the American Dream—Taking the Pursuit of Happiness as an Example* delves into the many ways in which the American Dream has been understood by individuals. It brings up the importance of hard work while also highlighting the dark side of the dream.

Sarah Churchwell provides us with extensive information on the origin, development, and significance of the American Dream in her book *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream*.

The book *A History of American Literature,* by Richard Gray, enriches our knowledge about the history of America, its literary heritage, its development, etc. It helps to understand the socio-political background of the time.

Lawrence R. Samuel's *The American Dream: A Cultural History* provides an in-depth understanding of American culture and the pervasiveness of the American Dream in the daily

life of the American people. The work also put forward the significant contributions of magazines, journals, and newspapers.

The American Dream, as portrayed in Jennifer Hochschild's book *Facing Up to the American Dream*, is characterised by hard work, perseverance, and eventual achievement. Ongoing conflicts and other facets of the American ideal are also discussed in the book. *How the American Dream Has Changed Over Time,* by Glen Student Resources, offers a concise outlook on how the people of America could break free from discriminatory restrictions and pursue their dreams. The evolving concept of the American Dream was another important theme of the article.

Alexander Bruno's *What Really Is the American Dream?* accurately describes the idea of the American Dream. It adds clarity to the notion and its purposes, including contributions by renowned scholars.

The American Dream in the 21st Century, by John K. White and Sandra Hanson, examines the existing status of the idea. The assessment keeps in mind the historical, socio-economic, political, race, gender, and other important factors that shape the idea of the dream.

The idea of the American Dream is presented in the article *A Literary Take on the American Dream* by Tansova Choudhury, which offers the viewpoints of prominent critics on the subject. The article considers the validity of literary men and the significance of studying literature in conjunction with history. The article cites consumerism as one of the factors that altered the initial concept of the American Dream.

Research Gap

Despite there being several research studying the concept of the American Dream, yet there remains a significant gap when it comes to the transformation of the American ideal. This research aims to bridge this gap by providing a better understanding of how the

American Dream deviated from its original idea, resulting in a significant impact on the lives of the people and the progress of the nation.

Problems to be investigated

The term American Dream was coined by James Truslow Adams in his work *The Epic of America* in 1931. Soon, the term came into vogue. Playwrights like Edward Albee and Sam Shepard brought the desired meaning of the American Dream to the surface, and through the characters of their plays, they portrayed how the dream got diluted and failed to fulfil the said promises. These playwrights have similar perspectives regarding the ideology of the American Dream.

This work will try to explore various aspects of the American Dream in the plays of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard. The plays will be discussed in detail to analyse the idea or perspective of the above-mentioned playwrights about the American Dream.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The American Dream is one of the ideologies about which people have different views and somehow deviates from its original form. Its meaning has evolved along with the passing of time. People have changed the meaning according to the circumstances and have forgotten the very essence of the great American dream. This work aims to provide a better understanding of the American Dream and how it is relevant and significant to us. Given this background, the intended research endeavours:

I. To analyse the set of ideals of the American Dream, such as social mobility, rights, liberty, and equality depicted in American literature.

II. To investigate the proponents of the American Dream, which states that all men are equal in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

III. To identify the impact of this ideology on American plays, and specifically in the

plays of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard.

IV. To explain the contribution of the American Dream to the development of American Literature.

V. To explore the extent to which the incorporation of the great American Dream in the plays of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard has succeeded in the portrayal of social and political life in twentieth-century America.

VI. To elucidate the major themes in the plays.

Hypothesis

The proposed research may bring out various aspects of the plays of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard. The study of the American Dream and other themes in their works may help us analyse the works. It will also reflect the relevance and significance of their plays to the current study. The thesis may be an attempt to evaluate the playwrights' perspectives, ranging from social to political life.

The incorporation of the theme of the American Dream in American Literature has reinforced the literary men to redefine the American Dream, which did focus on the aspects of freedom and equality, which later got corrupted as an idea focused on wealth, materialism, and consumerism. Edward Albee and Sam Shepard may have succeeded in depicting the American Dream in the socio-political context of America.

Scope and Limitations

The research work focuses on the origin, development and impact of the American Dream on American literature and American socio-political life through a close analysis of Edward Albee's *The American Dream, The Sandbox, A Delicate Balance* and Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, True West.* The information needed to carry out this research is adequately present in the select works. The deviation in the concept of the

American Dream from its original form leaves room to explore the extent of its impact, providing immense scope for research.

A detailed study of the select plays allows me to examine the set ideals, proponents and various facets of the American Dream. However, limited accessibility to secondary sources and the addition of research articles suggest the incompleteness of the existing knowledge on this topic.

Research Methodology

This scholarly investigation follows the historical trajectory of the American Dream concept as it expanded in American literature, gained prominence, and its impact on American society and politics. The analytical, descriptive, and historical approaches are all appropriate to this investigation. Using the historical method, we look for the roots and evolution of the American Dream. Whereas, the use of descriptive and analytical methods will enable us to sort and analyse the accumulated contents of Edward Albee's and Sam Shepard's plays.

The work can also be perceived from a descriptive-qualitative approach with the goal of precisely deducing the author's intended meaning. It includes a description of the elements present in the plays and a comprehensive study of the application of the theme of the American Dream. This research will be useful for introducing the concept of the American Dream, American literature, and the contributions of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard as leading American dramatists.

Tools to be used

The proposed study is to be done under the Faculty of Humanities; thus, the tools to be used are books, journals, magazines, extracts from interviews and speeches, the Internet, etc. A close and in-depth reading of the plays will be done to critically analyse them in

relation to the topic.

Plan of the Work

This research is anticipated to be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: Literature Review

Chapter III: A Study of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard as Leading American Dramatists

Chapter IV: The Origin, Evolution and Transformation of the American Dream

Chapter V: Demystifying the American Dream in Edward Albee's *The American Dream, The Sandbox, A Delicate Balance*

Chapter VI: Demystifying the American Dream in Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, True West*

Chapter VII: Conclusion

Bibliography

Chapter I: Introduction

The introduction will provide an overview of all the chapters in brief. This research delves into the theory behind the American Dream. Living in a socially ordered environment where one can reach their full potential, seek out opportunities, and pursue happiness was the original idea, but the idea got transformed and moved away from the original one and shifted towards materialistic possessions and consumerism.

Here, the term 'demystifying' is being used in its literal sense, which is to bring a better understanding of the notion of the American Dream and make it easier for the readers to understand it. The American Dream is an ideology, or a set of beliefs or hopes, that one can build towards his or her future. This conviction propels the citizens of America towards creating a life for themselves. Freedom, democracy, equal rights, and personal happiness are

considered essential components of the American Dream. However, the concept's definition varies from person to person.

Edward Franklin Albee (1928-2016) and Sam Shepard (1943-2017) in their works responded to how American society failed to fulfil its promise of a better and fuller life. They talk of consumerist and materialistic attitudes and the degradation of familial relationships. Their works portray how postwar life and foundation are meaningless and pointless. Albee, in fact, attacks the artificial standards of society for real values and principles and depicts how American society is searching deep into its spirituality and morality.

Chapter II: Literature Review

A review of literature is an integral part of any research work. Due to the diversity of opinion around the idea of the American Dream, any attempt to decipher it would need a thorough study of a number of relevant literary works. This chapter will be a literary investigation of the concept of the American Dream and the select works of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard in order to identify the research gap.

Chapter III: A Study of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard as Leading American Dramatists

This chapter will analyse Edward Albee's and Sam Shepard's biography and literary career.

Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928, in Washington D.C. During his early childhood, Albee was adopted by Reed and Frances Albee, a millionaire couple. Albee was named after Edward Franklin Albee, Reed's father. Edward was a brilliant writer in his teenage years. His poem *Eightee*n appeared in the 1945 issue of the Texas literary journal *Kaleidoscope*. *Schism*, his first play, was published in the school literary magazine. He penned his first substantial play *The Zoo Story* in 1958. The production of this play led Albee

towards an association with Samuel Beckett, who in turn introduced him to the Theatre of the Absurd. Later, the play *The Zoo Story* was considered the birth of American absurd drama. *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *The Sandbox*, and *The American Dream* were a series of one-act plays that later strengthened his career. In the play, *The American Dream, h*e continued to write and explore the themes he frequently came across in his writing career. Albee has chosen the theme of The American Dream, though devoid of clear meaning, to reflect upon the development of individualistic health, prosperity, measures of happiness, and achievements.

Samuel Shepard Rogers III was born, to an Army Air Force pilot and a teacher, on 5 November 1943. After his birth in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, their stay there was short as they were required to move throughout the United States quite often. The family settled in an American base in Guam. There, Sam Shepard learned that words have political connotations and the power to incite violence. Further, the family settled in Pasadena, Los Angeles. The inner workings of the white middle-class American family became one of Shepard's great mysteries, and he began to investigate them. He and his family once again shifted and headed towards a more rugged life in Duarte, California. Sam felt more at home here than at his previous stay.

The division between the poor working class and the middle class fascinated Sam, which he used as the setting and characters in his plays, including *Curse of the Starving Class, The Tooth of Crime,* and *The Unseen Hand*.

Soon he began experimenting with theatre, wrote his first play, and eventually performed with the Bishop's Company Repertory Players. Making his way to New York City, he found something amazing: *"The world I was living in was the most interesting thing to me, and I thought the best thing I could do maybe would be to write about it, so I started writing*

plays." With gradual exposure to the works of Samuel Beckett, his writing style evolved. He wrote the semi-absurdist one-act *Cowboys*. The number of compelling plays he wrote in a very short period of time established his place among the major American playwrights of the time, like LeRoi Jones, Edward Albee, and Lanfoord Wilson. His plays *Chicago, Icarus' Mother* and *Red Cross* earned him his first Obie Award. Some of his most notable plays include *A Lie of the Mind*, *True West*, *Simpatico*, *The Late Henry Moss*, *Buried Child*, and *Curse of the Starving Class.*

Chapter IV: The Origin, Evolution and Transformation of the American Dream

As human beings, we all want to fulfil our desires and dreams. We exert ourselves to reach these goals. The notion of the American Dream is closely associated with the principle that "hard work pays off." The idea originated during the colonial period, with the arrival of the first settlers and pilgrims from England who saw the potential of the United States as a land full of opportunities. They arrived with a vision to set up a new nation, different from the previous one.

During the Jazz Age of the 1920s, Americans were living the American dream to the fullest. Economic expansion, scientific breakthroughs, and the Harlem Renaissance all occurred during this era. During this period, the concept of the American Dream is also said to have been "corrupted." The philosophy prioritised material prosperity and consumption above more lofty ideals like equality and freedom. Hiked consumerism in American society acted as the key contributing factor to the same.

In constructing the nation, the American Dream turned out to be of great significance. Americans sought a common ground, encouraging unity among them since their nation was built on the backs of immigrants. In contrast to other nations, the first colonies were home to people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. However, the common goals of

opportunity and freedom were the driving forces for immigration to the United States. The American dream encompasses the ideals that provided the groundwork for the United States of America.

Richard M. Huber delves deep into the common American concept of success in his book, *The American Idea of Success,* published in 1971. For most Americans success was to achieve financial profoundness, and aspiration towards upward mobility in status was their ultimate goal. The American Dream has a limited orbit due to the very objective and impersonal trait of success. "The vital roots of the American spirit are either the building of a fortune or by building a reputation that makes you held in esteem by your neighbours" (Laski 41).

The ultimate goal of Americans was to improve themselves and acquiring wealth was considered the strongest ladder in the way of social upliftment. Americans have always fantasised about making the great jump from the ignored condition of 'rags' to the recognised state of 'riches' as economic success translated into social accomplishment. Throughout American history and culture, the notion of the American dream has shaped the principles, ethics, and values of ordinary citizens with aspirations.

Consequently, many playwrights created stage tragedies that mainly depicted the pursuit of the American dream by both people and society. Several plays explore the American ideal and have characters who are trying to better their lives and the lives of their families by climbing the social ladder. A few shed light on the lives of people who seem to be living it up, while others depict those who have fallen short of the American Dream. The most remarkable American playwrights and their works depicting the American Dream are Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons;* Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire;* Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun;*

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town;* Edward Albee's *The American Dream, The Sandbox, A Delicate Balance,* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?;* Sam Shepard's family trilogy *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child and True West.* The theme of the American Dream has been delineated in other genres of literature, like novels and so on, by some prominent writers. For instance, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin,* Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy,* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby.*

Chapter V: Demystifying the American Dream in Edward Albee's *The American Dream, The Sandbox, A Delicate Balance*

This chapter will analyse select plays of Edward Albee in the context of the American Dream.

As an opus belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd Movement that emerged in the decades after World War II, Edward Albee's one-act play *The American Dream* satirically disseminates the concept of the American dream. The American Dream is the central theme that is immediately apparent from the play's title. The play mocks the American Dream and the ideal American family. American idealism is shown to be a myth by Albee in this drama. The play shows the ways that the American Dream is an elusive fantasy. In the play, Albee emphasises that 'the American dream'—a society characterised by equality, opportunity, achievement through sheer hard work, and familial bliss—is and always has been a myth.

The increasingly materialistic society that arose in the decades after World War II was something that Albee vehemently disagreed with. Through the creation of his characters, he conveys his opinions. A generation that refuses to put in the effort required to live a fulfilling life is the focus of the drama. This is reflected through the significant characters of Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and the Young Man. Albee proposes that if people follow 'the American

dream' as hollowly and carelessly as Mommy does, they will never be content. When it comes to contemporary society, however, Grandma couldn't be more different. She finds it perplexing that people are so fascinated with materialistic possessions. She despises Mommy for being so preoccupied with money.

A major theme in the play is the family. By subtly revealing the conventional American family's hidden and terrible secret—an adopted boy whom Mommy and Daddy disfigured—Albee deconstructed the notion of the traditional American family.

The character of the 'Young Man' embodies the American dream. Through this character, Albee alludes to a modern version of the American dream that, although fulfilling in the short term, does not promise contentment in the long run. Those who put more effort into their outward appearance and less into developing the qualities that nourish their soul, such as meaningful relationships, are doomed to misery.

One of the most praised early one-acts and a pioneer of American absurdist theatre, Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* was first produced in 1960. The play ridicules American materialism, mindlessness, and the emptiness of American life. Albee continues the idea with the same characters: Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and the Young Man. Their behaviour towards one another epitomises the outlook prevalent in their society, resulting in the breakdown of relationships. Here, the sandbox represents the grave where Grandma will die. Grandma is in conflict with her family, society and death.

Albee addresses the issue that people face every day—how to deal with our parents' incapacity to care for themselves in old age—by highlighting the dysfunctional family. Albee's characters show how trying to be the ideal American family really makes them feel inferior about themselves and their lives.

Perhaps the most important idea Albee expresses in *The Sandbox* is the disintegration

of the family unit. In order to hide the darker sides of their life and give the impression that they are living the American dream, the characters in Albee's works often construct illusions. The couple creates an image of a perfect American family since they know they can't achieve it in real life. The American people acquired unnecessary possessions such as fancy cars, mansions, and apparel to make themselves appear more classy and richer than they really were. They often just brought more unhappiness instead of contentment as they tried to keep up with their neighbours. Their lives seemed even more hollow and meaningless as they basked in the haze of their prosperity.

Edward Albee's 1966 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *A Delicate Balance* deals with a dysfunctional, affluent suburban family. The drama explores the ill effects of the American dream, including anxiety, the emptiness of modern life, illusion and loss of opportunity, escape from reality, and discontentment with relationships.

With their permanent houseguests, the middle-aged, upper-class, and delicately balanced couple Agnes and Tobias live a financially comfortable but emotionally uneasy life in their suburban nest. Eventually, the equilibrium is lost due to the overcrowding of the house, the struggles for understanding and space, and the frustrations of attempting to reach a compromise. There is a complete lack of empathy, social sensibility and tolerance.

Evidently, there is no warmth among the characters of the play, they are cold and uncaring towards one another, there are only a few superficial gestures of love and fail to communicate at all. The dynamics between parents and children, friendship, and finding one's place in American culture are among the play's central themes. The characters are seen seeking solace in the same house, and they constantly deal with denial of emotions (often reality itself), loss of opportunities, and the crushing weight of regret over past decisions. Throughout the play, characters are seen prioritizing material prosperity over maintaining

healthy relationships with one another.

Chapter VI: Demystifying the American Dream in Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, True West*

This chapter will analyse select plays of Sam Shepard in the context of the American Dream.

Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* depicts a working-class family in a sparsely populated desert region of California. It was first premiered in London in 1977. The plot of this three-act play revolves around a dysfunctional family residing at a farmhouse that they want to sell hoping for bigger and better things. The farmhouse is a symbol of their status in society.

The play explores the impact of wealth in the United States, moral responsibilities to one's family, and the struggle for dignity. The disappointment with the capitalist system crushes the hopes and ambitions of this American family. Shepard mostly focuses on social and familial breakdown, estrangement, and alienation. The play progresses with the struggle between the disintegration of the American family and their dream of upliftment of their social status.

The family is suffering not only from physical or economic starvation, they are rather deprived of affection, love, trust, and intimate relationships within the family. The fragmentation in the family clearly depicts the fallibility of the American Dream. The estrangement between the parents has a catastrophic impact on their relationship with Emma, their adolescent rebellious daughter. Being a member of the social 'starving class,' and at the same time holding on to the American Dream, which however is unattainable, has been presented as their 'curse.'

With the 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning family drama *Buried Child*, Sam Shepard came

to national prominence and attention. The play is about a middle-class American family hiding a horrible secret. The major themes of the play are infanticide and incest. Shepard portrays Dodge's family and home as a symbol of the crumbling American Dream.

In this play, every member of the family stands in for a distinct American ideal and how each of them has failed miserably at attaining different aspects of the American dream: wealth, freedom and familial bliss, often represented by the ability to own a house and raise one's family.

There are several instances, reflected through the characters, which signify the unattainability of the American Dream. The play implies that the failure of these characters to attain the American dream isn't the only problem; rather, the dream itself is deceptive and impossible to achieve, or at least it's never as perfect as it seems on the surface.

Sam Shepard in his play *True West* (1980) outlines his vision of the American dream's function in societal development by bringing up the contrasting views of the Old and New West. Two brothers, Austin and Lee, who have very different views on what it means to live a fulfilled life, yet whose dreams fall short since they aren't content with their achievements or lifestyle, serve to illustrate this polarity.

The play explores the relationship between the two brothers, who have led very different lives. Austin is supposedly a more stable and respectable sibling, a graduate screenwriter with a structured lifestyle dictated by society. On the other hand, Lee is a drifter, very free-willed, and lives a nomadic lifestyle. The play deals with the emotions of these men, mainly insecurities and jealousy, ending with them essentially switching roles.

Shepard puts forward his views on the significant role of a family in developing one's personality and in influencing different aspects of the person's life. The play depicts that each person born into a family inherits the burdens of previous generations. The play exhibits the

difficulty of trying to live up to that ideal, and how unhappy it makes a person. The dual faces of the West symbolise the American dream. In contrast to Lee's chaotic Old West, Austin stands for the New West in the suburbs. As the two brothers deal with their divergent ideologies and lifestyles, the drama delves into the theme of identity crisis. In their quest to achieve the American Dream, the characters do not find bliss, rather they are lost, confused and continuously in conflict with themselves and those around them.

The play emphasises that the West and the Dream are powerful and enduring forces in American society. Austin and Lee are chasing the idealised vision of the West, which does not exist, hoping for the betterment of their lives which ultimately results in dissatisfaction.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

This chapter will attempt to conclude the research work. A detailed analysis of the select plays of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard will bring various aspects of the American Dream to the surface. The paradigm shift in American thought has resulted in a loss of values, dysfunctional relationships, and the disintegration of family which is the basic unit of society, ultimately leading to cultural loss and identity crises.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the proposed study is reflected in the fact that the work focuses on the analysis of the origin, development, and impact of the theme—the American Dream—on American literature and American social and political life. An in-depth study of the plays of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard will enable us to have a better understanding of the theme and take us through the political and social circumstances of the time. These playwrights have portrayed the aspects of the American Dream exceptionally well and made us aware of the actual meaning of the great American Dream.

Relevance to the Present-Day Problem and Contribution to the Future Knowledge

Edward Albee and Sam Shepard both depict contemporary social and political issues in their plays. The works of the aforementioned playwrights thoughtfully address the issue of the great American Dream, a phrase first used by James Adams in his book *The Epic of America*. As Adams has mentioned in his work, the European aristocracy failed to understand the significance of the American Dream, similarly, Edward Albee and Sam Shepard depicted the status quo of the great American Dream. The works reflect how people have misunderstood the meaning of the American Dream and are now on a completely different path. Their works enable us to trace back the explanations for this change and how the meaning changed with respect to time. The works clearly reflect the failing condition of the correct interpretation of the American Dream and how this creates an impact on the people and progress of the nation.

The playwrights have tried to reflect upon the modified definition of the American Dream. They also reflected upon the shift from the prospects of equality, opportunities, prosperity, social mobility, etc., to the ideologies of consumerism and materialism. These changes are adding to the creation of an artificial society that is far from real moral values and principles. This thesis will study and analyse the original idea and the present idea of the American Dream. Studying the works of Edward Albee and Sam Shepard, this thesis will justify the viability of the topic, which is significantly relevant to the present day.

Select Bibliography

Primary Sources

Albee, Edward. "*The American Dream: A Play."* Coward Mc Can, 1961.

---. *The Sandbox.* Revised ed.*,* Dramatist's Play Service, 1959.

---. *A Delicate Balance.* Reprint ed., Harry N. Abrams, 2013.

Shepard, Sam. *Buried Child.* Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1997.

---. *True West.* Samuel French, 1981.

---. *Curse of the Starving Class.* Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1976.

Secondary Sources

Alqadhi, Yahya. "Invisibility of American Dream in Albee's The American Dream." International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews, vol. 7, issue 1, Feb. 2020, www.ijrar.org.

A Study Guide for Sam Shepard's "Curse of the Starving Class." Gale, Study Guides, 2017.

Bloom, Harold. *Sam Shepard (Bloom's Major Dramatists).* Chelsea House Publishers, 2002.

Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation.* OUP USA, 2004.

Crank, James A. *Understanding Sam Shepard.* University of South Carolina Press, 2012.

Diamond, Anna. "The Original Meanings of the "American Dream" and "America First" were Starkly Different from How we Use Them Today." *Smithsonian Magazine,* Oct. 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/behold-america-american-dream-slogan-book-sarah-churchwell-180970311/.

Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature.* Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Hochschild, Jennifer L. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation: 55.* Princeton University Press, 1996.

Gupta, Tanu and Mahal, Ramandeep. "Consumerism in Edward Albee's The American Dream." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature,* Vol 3-2, 2015.

Gutierrez, Daniel A. "Is the American Dream is Still Alive?" Idealistic Institute: Economics and Ethics of the American Dream, 2016, 188-190.

Huber, Richard M. *The American Idea of Success.* Pushcart Press, 1987.

Laski, Harold J. *The American Democracy (Works of Harold J. Laski): A Commentary and an Interpretation.* Routledge, 2014.

McNeil, Jeffery. "The American Dream Isn't Dead, It's Just Misunderstood." The Edgerton Essays, 2021.

Roudane, Matthew. *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard (Cambridge Companions to Literature).* Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Samuel, Lawrence. *The American Dream: A Cultural History.* Syracuse University Press, 2012.

Sandy, Chen. "Is the American Dream Dead for All Americans?" The Huffington Post, 2016.

Sumarsono, Irwan, et al. "Failure in Gaining the American Dream in Sam Shepard's Starving Class." *World Journal of English Language,* vol. 13, no. 7, 2023, http://wjel.sciedupress.com. Wolak, Jennifer and David A.M. Peterson. "The Dynamic American Dream." *American Journal of Political Science,* vol. 64, no.4, 2020, 968-81, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45295360.

Tucker, Martin. *Sam Shepard (Literature & Life)* Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 1992.

White, John. *The American Dream in the 21st Century.* Temple University Press, U.S., 2011.